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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA SUSPECTS A EUROPEAN PUSH FOR
SLEIMAN

REF: BEIRUT 1652

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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SUMMARY

11. (C) Following the French, Spanish, and Italian Foreign Ministers' visit to Lebanon, head of the Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea believes the three FMs, possibly along with the Canadians, Australians, and Germans, are quietly pushing for General Michel Sleiman to be the next president, and he is concerned other countries will get on board in the interest of avoiding a delay. The three FMs reportedly did not offer anything substantive to the National Dialogue participants or their representatives, nor did they explicitly name candidates. Geagea, who opposes Sleiman's candidacy (while believing Sleiman is an "honest" but weak man), believes MP Boutros Harb can get greater than a half plus one majority, and has been working toward this goal. Geagea also noted "movement" in the Aoun camp but thought that Michel Aoun still maintains his fantasy that he will be president. End Summary.

FRENCH, SPANISH, AND ITALIANS:
PUSHING FOR SLEIMAN?

12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces party (LF), on October 22, two days after the French, Spanish, and Italian FMs met in Beirut with the National Dialogue participants or their representatives. Geagea relayed that the FMs' message to the political leaders from both camps gathered at the French Ambassador's residence was that they should agree on a candidate. He said the FMs offered nothing of substance and did not explicitly name candidates; however, he suspects that some of the FMs are pushing, beneath the surface and possibly with Canadian, Australian, and German support, for an agreement on General Michel Sleiman.

13. (C) Geagea has not heard whether the British, Egyptians, or the Patriarch are also supporting this idea, although he assured us that he could sway the Patriarch away from Sleiman if need be. He mused that the European support he detects for Sleiman has less to do with any infatuation with Sleiman and more to do with the European concern about having a solution. Speaking of his March 14 allies, Geagea said that Druse leader MP Walid Jumblatt would not support Sleiman and he is uncertain about MP Saad Hariri, whom he described as currently perplexed. Geagea recommended we work on the

Europeans to get them to back away from advocating for Sleiman.

14. (C) Sleiman is also enjoying support from the pro-Syrian camp. In the middle of the meeting, Geagea got up to retrieve the front page of ad-Diyyar, a pro-Syrian newspaper listing its preferred candidates: Sleiman at the top of the list, followed by Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, then MP Fares Boueiz, former MP Jean Obeid, MP Robert Ghanem, Michel Edde, and MP Pierre Dakdash. These candidates were chosen, according to Geagea, because they either have some form of business or personal relationship to Syria, or they are weak and easy to manipulate.

WITHERING CRITICISM
OF G-2 CHIEF GEORGES KHOURY

15. (S) Speaking one-on-one with the Ambassador at the end of the meeting, Geagea said that he respected Sleiman as an "honest" man. He compared Sleiman favorably with LAF Army Intelligence (G-2) chief Georges Khoury. Khoury, according to Geagea, is subservient to Syria, so deeply implicated in the Syrian intelligence structure that he must be ousted after the election of a new president. While Khoury has indeed taken some important steps in fighting Sunni extremism, he does so for political reasons: to attack Lebanon's Sunni establishment, particularly PM Saad Hariri and PM Fouad Siniora. "Never" would Khoury do anything to thwart Hizballah's wishes, Geagea insisted, accusing Khoury of being a tool of Hizballah as well as Syria. Michel Sleiman, by contrast, is merely weak and fearful and thus subject to Syrian and particularly Hizballah influence. Unlike Khoury, Sleiman is not complicit in Hizballah's

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takeover of the country, but he is not strong enough to resist it.

MOVEMENT IN THE AOUN CAMP

16. (C) Geagea acknowledged that there is movement within the Aoun camp, with Michel Aoun reportedly "perplexed" (a word Geagea also used in describing others). Geagea reported that at the meeting with the EU foreign ministers at the French residence, Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun appeared desperate for his own candidacy, speaking little and in a restrained voice. Given Geagea and Aoun's shared disinterest in Sleiman, the possibility of Sleiman as the European choice prompted Geagea to dispatch LF vice-president George Adwan to meet Aoun the day after the meeting with the FMs. (Note: While Geagea has in the past several weeks used intermediaries to pursue contact with Aoun, sending Adwan is a marked rise in rank. End note.)

17. (C) Geagea maintained that Aoun still harbors hopes. He said that Aoun needed to be told directly that he will not be the next president, and that Aoun's advisors will never do this. Geagea dismissed the oft-repeated rumor on the Beirut political gossip circuit that he had actually offered Aoun the possibility of naming the candidates, with March 14 electing one of Aoun's choices (as long as it precluded Aoun himself). What he actually offered, Geagea said, was the possibility to Aoun that the two of them decide together who would be acceptable candidates. Parliament would elect a president off of a list determined by Geagea and Aoun, who represent an estimated 90 percent of Lebanon's Christians. But Aoun refused to go along with this suggestion.

HARB AS THE HALF PLUS PLUS CANDIDATE

18. (C) The Ambassador asked Geagea about the "half plus plus" strategy (reftel). Geagea said he favored it and believes MP Boutros Harb is the best candidate to gather the half plus

plus level of support. He thinks Jumblatt and Hariri would share that view. Geagea has started working on MP Elie Skaiff (from the Aoun bloc), Bahije Tabarah (March 14, but considered wobbly), and some people close to Aoun -- he mentioned Ghassan Moukheiber, Farid al-Khazen, Salim Salhab -- to bring them around to the idea. Geagea believes it is best to start with these individuals to build momentum and then reach out to a broader group.

¶9. (C) The Ambassador noted that Harb does not enjoy good relations with March 14 allies Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt. At times, it seems that Harb trusts Nabih Berri more than his own partners. Acknowledging that there is a problem, Geagea nevertheless expressed his conviction that Jumblatt and Hariri, who want a March 14 candidate, would back Harb, especially if Harb could produce votes from the Aoun bloc. While Nassib Lahoud is the best candidate, Geagea said, it is unlikely that Nassib will be able to expand his support beyond March 14.

COMMENT

¶10. (S) PM Siniora's senior advisor, Mohamad Chatah, told us that Siniora had the same impression as Geagea regarding an EU push for Michel Sleiman as president. Marwan Hamadeh and Saad Hariri, however, expressed less concern about this possibility. We are not sure where Geagea got his information about European support for Sleiman, for we understand that only Hizballah mentioned Sleiman explicitly at the group meeting attended by Geagea with the EU foreign ministers. (Geagea told us that he also had ten minutes alone with his "old friend" French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, but we would be very surprised if the French advocated for Sleiman -- whose much-touted "honesty" would be questioned by France, which has an arrest warrant out for Sleiman for fraudulently acquiring French citizenship.)

¶11. (C) We suspect that ad-Diyyar, Lebanon's Syrian mouthpiece newspaper, probably once again hinted at what is really going on: yes, the Lebanese can negotiate and even elect a new president, as long as it comes from the list of candidates mentioned by ad-Diyyar as being acceptable. Sleiman, then, has competition from six others who seem to have won the Syrian seal of approval.

FELTMAN